

Mumsy Merkel woos women voters ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

AS the host of a club that looks after children before and after school so that their parents can carry on working, Elisabeth Schmidt is doing her bit to help the revival of Germany's abysmally low birthrate.

Such clubs are springing up everywhere, encouraged by the chancellor, Angela Merkel, who is seeking re-election next Sunday on a platform that includes an eye-catching expansion of family policies intended to encourage more Germans to have children.

Schmidt, a 47-year-old housewife with two children of her own, will certainly vote for Merkel's Christian Democrat Union (CDU).

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Women could hold the key to the election, with Merkel's family-friendly initiatives expected to be generously repaid at the ballot box. Recent polls have shown that the CDU has a higher proportion of female voters than any of its rivals. This has reinforced the view that, in a country with one of the lowest birthrates in Europe, family policy will carry more weight with many voters than job creation or the fight against climate change.

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Strange as it may seem, Germany has been one of the most challenging countries in western Europe for working mothers because of a widespread belief that women should give up their professional lives once they have children.

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Things are beginning to change, however, under the country's first female chancellor.

"She is a powerful role model for all women," said Ingrid Müller, a 35-year-old historian. "I will vote for Merkel because she is trustworthy, competent and subtle, and comes across as superior to her male rivals."

The appointment of Ursula von der Leyen, a mother of seven, as family minister, heralded the start of the revolution: she is introducing hundreds of thousands of state-subsidised childcare spaces.

In 2007, she brought in so-called "parents' pay", guaranteeing women 67% of their previous income for two years if they wanted to stay at home with their children. Fathers are also able to stop work for a while and be paid. Not only that. Merkel has condemned the pay gap between sexes: "I advise any woman who earns less than her male colleague for the same work to go to her boss self-confidently and say something has to change."

The result is that women who might not consider themselves CDU supporters are warming to Merkel, a former physicist whose unpretentious style is at odds with the typically high-handed approach of Germany's male conservatives.

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- reprinted from the Times Online

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